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A MONTHLY LETTER ABOUT EVANGELISM

LETTRE MENSUELLE SUR L'ÉVANGÉLISATION

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The following letter was written by B. Harnik, M.D., who is a marriage counsellor of the Cantonal Church of St. Gallen, Switzerland. Before he was appointed as a full-time marriage counsellor he had had some years of experience as an evangelist.

Dr. Harnik describes his work as an open door to the world which provides inexhaustible opportunities for personal and group evangelism.

CHURCH MARRIAGE COUNSEL AND EVANGELISM

Some years ago a friend sent me a questionnaire concerning my experiences as an evangelist. I reported on the two years that I spent in helping with evangelism programmes in the Canton of Aargau in Switzerland. In these programmes we trained people to organise the preparatory work for a week of evangelism, and to follow it up. Lectures, discussions and house to house visitation were employed. In the follow-up work we mainly developed "house-churches". In addition to this, however, I had had experience as a marriage counsellor, but I did not mention it in my report on evangelism. In his reply to my report, my friend expressed surprise that I did not mention my work as a marriage counsellor in connection with evangelism, "because what we are doing here is personal evangelism - a matter of outstanding importance today". My friend was absolutely right. But I only realised this after several years' work as a full-time church marriage counsellor.

Before describing my experiences, let me briefly indicate the present position of marriage and the family, the mentality of modern people, and what the Bible has to say in reply to their questions. One of the most burning problems which face Swiss people in this time of great prosperity is the whole question of sex-love-marriage-family. Switzerland has more divorces than any other Western country. The tremendous number of triangle-situations (in which either the wife or the husband has been unfaithful) are indications of a tremendous stress. It is difficult to solve such problems owing to the individualistic, anti-traditional, libertine mentality of modern people, especially young people brought up to think only of success, enjoyment and happiness. The psychological sciences seek in vain for

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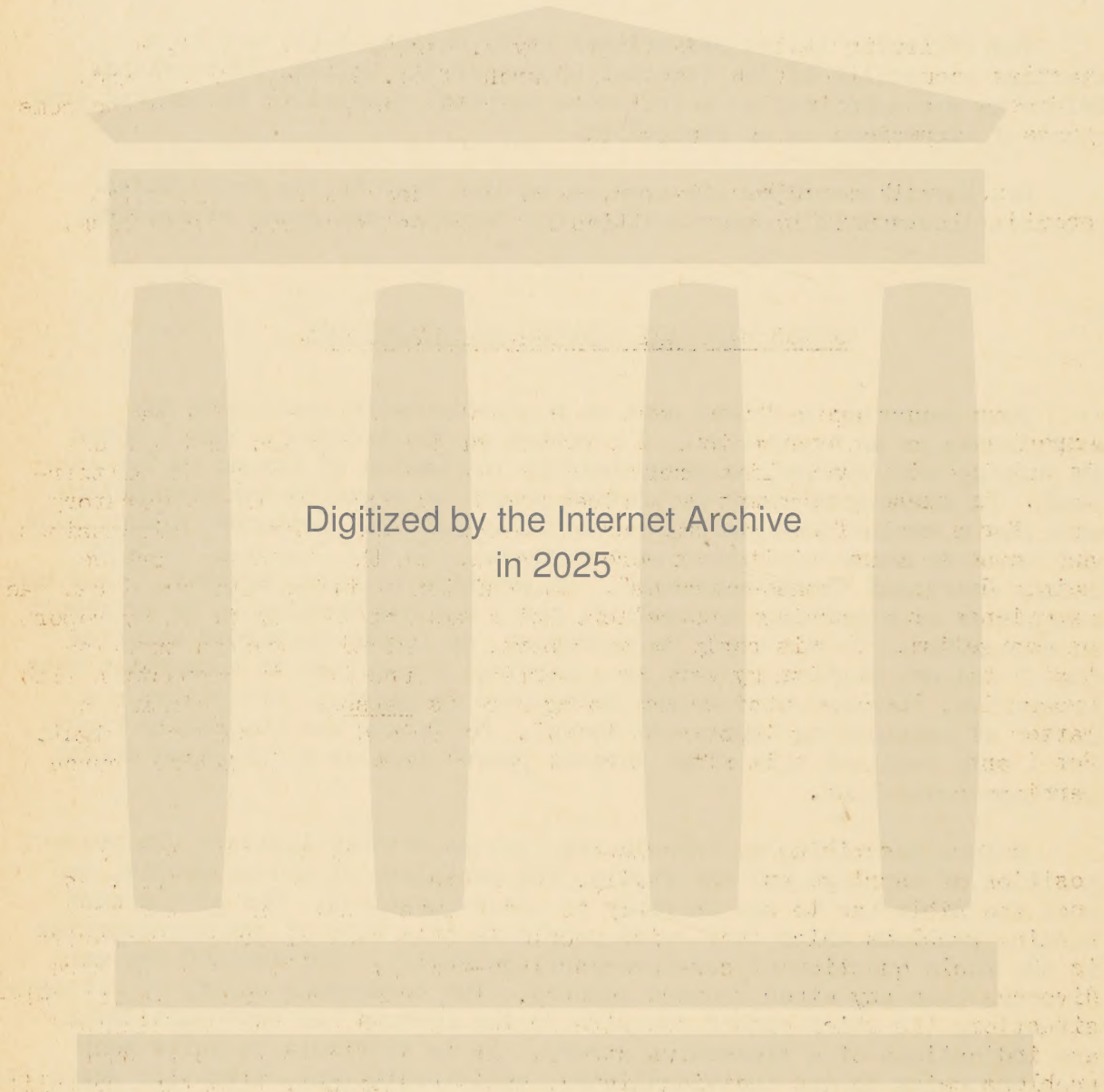

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an effective cure for these stresses and problems, but they simply cannot help their "patients" out of the vicious circle of eudaemonism. But the Bible has an answer which can meet needs of our time, because God wishes to speak to the individual direct in order to lead him into true fellowship with Christ and his Church. Moreover, the Bible is extraordinarily up-to-date because it is not only a book about God, but par excellence a book about marriage. The Covenant between God and Israel, and the Covenant between Christ and the Church, are illustrated and explained through the symbol of marriage (Genesis 1:27, the Song of Solomon, Eph. 5:21 ff. - and why not also I. Cor. 12 and 13? - and Rev. 21:1 ff. and Hosea 1:2). Indeed, marriage provides the best possible opportunity for explaining to modern people the meaning of the incarnate Word. What better counsellor could one have for the problems of sex, love and marriage today than the Epistles of St. Paul?

As far as one can see, the marriage guidance centres set up by the cantonal churches in St. Gallen, Zürich, Basle, Schaffhausen, etc. are not intended basically as centres for evangelism, but as advisory clinics. They therefore try to find staff who are experts - trained pastors, psychologists or doctors with a Christian attitude and outlook. For those with experience in this work it is no secret that marriage guidance combined with Christian witness and help provides inexhaustible opportunities for personal evangelism, and also for group evangelism; but the Church itself is still far from realising this as a matter of course.

What elements in evangelism through marriage guidance provide openings for evangelism? I shall briefly describe the chief points:

1. The people who come for advice (some married, some unmarried) may easily be divided into the following groups: those who do not profess any faith, those who are on the way of faith but do not regard it as the purpose of their lives, and convinced Christians. My statistics for the year 1955 show that of the married couples one quarter had no religious affiliation, one quarter were in some way on the way of faith (i.e. one partner nominally Christian with the marriage therefore uncertain), and one half convinced Christians. On the latter category, one quarter were Protestant marriages, and one quarter were either Roman Catholics or mixed Protestant and Roman Catholic. Among the single people about 40% were indifferent to religion, their attitude usually becoming clear from their personal confessions. The marriage guidance centre deals with over 800 cases per annum, of which about 30 are fresh cases every month, the rest being habitually in need of help. This entails about 1,500 consultations annually, and therefore provides plenty of opportunity to discuss personal problems, and to practise spiritual care and evangelism. Of course the marriage counsellor must not regard his clients as objects for evangelism; but he must be inwardly prepared and outwardly on the alert, so that when people open their hearts God can enter.

2. One must not try to force the service we give into a system, because every case is different. But in principle we may regard our aims as follows: (a) to help Christians to solve their problems, to liberate them, to sanctify them and make them more ready to give service in the Church and in the world; (b) to show couples in which one is a believer and the other is not the way to a common basis of Christian faith, greater tolerance (I. Cor.7:12 ff.)

and a more conscious religious life; (c) to show Protestants who are merely nominal Christians the opportunities for greater freedom and love in following Christ; (d) bringing the Catholics closer to their Church if they have unintentionally neglected it; or throwing light on the Protestant Church in such a way that they become interested in it, if they deliberately wish to avoid the Catholic Church. (In theory this task is a very ticklish one in St. Gallen, but in practice there are no difficulties at all, if the problem is approached Christocentrically, and not from the angle of church-politics).

3. As a marriage counsellor and spiritual adviser one constantly has to do with the sphere of psychology and psychotherapy. As one who is familiar both with the world and with the Christian faith the counsellor must perceive the limitations and possibilities of both, and use both to the glory of God. Among the large number of people seeking psychological advice (many of whom consult the marriage counsellor because he is a "specialist") one must keep on trying to disclose sources of faith which may be used as therapeutic factors. Why not? If faith looks towards eternity it must already be active and effective in this life. But one must avoid being biassed, and one must not on any account suggest faith as a sort of injection which will effect a cure.

4. In many cases when people speak of their own particular cross and their personal difficulties, it is valuable to remind them of the man who carried the heaviest Cross of all - Jesus, the way of peace. The marriage counsellor has to give advice to many broken-down, unfaithful, alcoholic husbands and wives and embittered single people. Only too frequently he is unable to offer them any help out of their problems; but he can offer them help in their problems: Jesus Christ. In cases where (humanly speaking) there is no solution (not even divorce can be described as a completely satisfactory way out) one may draw attention to the Cross (a stumbling-block to the self-righteous and foolishness to the know-alls of today) - the Cross which is an experience of the power of God which can save men and show them the way to victory.

5. The questions about the personal attitude of the marriage counsellor are the same as those which apply to the "classical" evangelist and the spiritual adviser, so I will not go into them here in detail.

In addition to counselling, educational work and lectures provide many opportunities for spiritual counsel and evangelism. How thankful we are in St. Gallen that the doors have opened (almost by themselves) to hundreds of boys and girls in a large number of schools and groups! Courses on what are called "the facts of life" are occasions not only for giving explanations and guidance in matters concerning sexuality, love, marriage and the call to celibacy on a biblical basis; they are also opportunities for evangelism. Individual boys or girls then often seek one out for advice, and these personal conversations may develop into wonderful contacts.

In order to make full use of the opportunities which God has given, the Church must extend its marriage-guidance service, with either full-time or part-time counsellors. Unfortunately there is still no specialised training for this task: most of the marriage counsellors have taken up the work

"by chance". But I may draw attention to one opening for instruction on marriage problems, which is to be started in the very near future. Under the auspices of the Swiss Protestant Church Federation a study commission has been formed to examine questions concerning marriage and the family. This commission will organise three weeks' special study of the question per annum, with opportunities for doctors, pastors, teachers, social workers and other persons interested to undertake theoretical and practical training in order to equip themselves as full-time or part-time marriage counsellors. Further information about these courses will appear in the press in the near future.